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SUBJECT: PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO ARLINGTON NATIONAL  
CEMETERY ANGERS SOME IRAQIS

¶1. (SBU) Prime Minister Maliki's July 21-25 visit to the United States generally received factual and neutral coverage in the local press. Iraqi media stories focused on the implementation of the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) in addition to Maliki's meetings with U.S. and UN officials regarding Iraq's Chapter VII status. Most political parties were mired in the rush of parliamentary activity in the final week before summer recess, as well as Kurdistan regional elections, and reserved judgment on the visit. Echoing the sentiments of several contacts, MP Haider al-Suwaidi (Shi'a independent) told poloffs on July 26 that he was pleased to see the Prime Minister and U.S. officials promote "normalization of Relations." He suspected that most Iraqis appreciated the discussion of expanded bilateral trade and economic assistance.

¶2. (U) The Prime Minister's visit to Arlington National Cemetery on July 23 to pay tribute to fallen U.S. service members was heavily criticized by the Sadr Trend and Sadr-affiliated clerics; the Tawafuq bloc leader also weighed in against the gesture. On July 26, Sadrist MP Maha al-Douri bitterly condemned the visit in an interview with Iraqi media, characterizing it as an attempt by Maliki "to silence anti-occupation voices in Iraq." Al-Douri accused the PM of dishonoring Iraq by visiting "the graves of those who killed and raped innocent civilians." Imam Diya al-Shawki denounced the Arlington visit during his sermon on July 24 and called on Maliki to pay respect to the graves of "innocent Iraqis and members of the resistance" instead of U.S. military cemeteries. MP Dhafer al-Ani, the new bloc leader of the (Sunni) Tawafuq coalition, accused Maliki of political posturing during his trip to the U.S. and criticized him for visiting the graves of "occupation soldiers," claiming that it was "an act that caused discontent and alarm amongst the Iraqi people." (Note: It is unclear if al-Ani was speaking for the bloc or for himself, since the official Tawafuq spokesperson is Selim al Jebori. End Note.)

COMMENT  
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¶3. (SBU) As political leaders wrangle to form new coalitions and party lists for parliamentary elections in January 2010, most are trying to characterize themselves as anti-sectarian nationalists. Tawafuq and the Sadr Trend may be speaking out on the Arlington visit to portray Maliki as being out of touch with the Iraqi public and to cast doubt on his nationalist credentials. While there hasn't been widespread condemnation of the Arlington visit, neither has there been a strong show of support. In the prelude to campaign season, it is unlikely that political leaders would want to back the PM's gesture publicly.  
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